

Was Borobudur a Mandala?

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The suggestion that Borobudur was a mandala has been considered by many scholars. In a paper presented at the *Pertemuan Ilmiah Arkeologi ke-7* at Cipanas in March 1996, Marijke Klokke advanced her reasons why this hypothesis should be rejected. Her objections consist of the facts that Borobudur's center is a stupa, not an image; there are no images of other gods such as the eight directional guardians which should be depicted on a mandala; the importance of stories in Borobudur's reliefs, which form a linear progression, rather than a concentric sequence; the Vairocana iconography at Borobudur does not fit Tantrayana; and the fact that Vajrayana philosophy did not exist yet when Borobudur was laid out.

In a literal sense, Marijke Klokke is correct. Borobudur does not fit the technical, strict, narrow definition of a mandala. On the other hand, it is hard to believe that those who conceived Borobudur's groundplan of three round terraces above four square galleries were completely unaware of the mandala pattern, and that the undeniable similarities between their design and a mandala's outline is entirely coincidental. As I argued in my book *Golden Tales of the Buddhas* (Miksic 1990), Borobudur's designers had a much loftier goal than merely replicating a single religious diagram. They must have been intent on combining several symbolic systems in one structure.

Their design was governed by the desire to represent at least three symbolic systems. The number three has been part of many

previous hypotheses concocted in an attempt to explain Borobudur's structure. The best-known of these is the theory of the three realms, Kamadhatu, Rupadhatu, and Arupadhatu, corresponding to the hidden foot, the relief galleries, and the circular terraces. Most scholars however now reject this theory (see e.g. Wayman 1982: 170 n. 67; de Casparis 1968, cited in Gomez and Woodward 1982: 10.; and L.O. Gomez 1982: 180-181, and p. 192 n. 32). Nevertheless, this theory still has adherents. The art historian from UCLA, Robert Brown (1997: 74) wrote that Borobudur's organization "very strongly places the Buddha into a continuum of unmanifest to manifest, with the *stupa* being the unmanifest and the anthropomorphic forms the manifest." He compares this ideology that of Siva as the lingga (u n m a n i f e s t) , a n d anthropomorphic imagery on temple walls. This formulation would not be inconsistent with the idea of the three realms.

Another promising hypothesis is that Borobudur is meant to function in three or more symbolic dimensions rather than just one: as a mountain symbolizing the ten stages of the pilgrim aspiring to attain Bodhisattvahood; as a symbol of political power legitimizing the rule of the Sailendra king; and as a stupa, representing death and rebirth. In this article, I will summarize more arguments in favor of this hypothesis which were not included in my book.

Borobudur may be even more complex than this three-fold division would suggest. It is

probable that within these three dimensions, there were further, multiple layers of symbolism. The upper section of Borobudur for example could have taken numerous forms and still fulfilled the function of being the crown of the entire structure. The designers needed to create round terraces to fulfill the task of making an architectural reference to a mandala, even if they did not feel themselves strictly bound to construct a three-dimensional version of such a diagram, but to fulfill this requirement, many simpler solutions could have been found. The designers instead chose a much more complex design, which is additional proof indicating that they wanted to achieve many symbolic goals, not just one.

The multiple stupas on the upper terraces may have been inspired by the need to manifest a specific text. Some have nominated the Lotus Sutra (*Saddharmapundarika*) as the inspiration for the form of the topmost terraces. Another theory proposed by the art historian Hiram Woodward is that the perforated stupas stand for the *Dharmadhatu*: they may simultaneously represent the elements (dharma), and planets and stars, the moon and sun. The diamond and square perforations in the stupas may correspond to the shapes of the breaths which Buddhist practitioners inhale and exhale (Woodward 2004). Woodward further suggests that "Perfection Path Buddhism" (*Paramitayana*) was "the Buddhism, essentially, of Borobudur's narrative reliefs". But there were also

elements of Mantrayana, specifically the Eight Bodhisattvas which are depicted on Mendut's exterior. (See also Woodward 1999: 34-43. On the *Dharmadhatu* see Wayman and Tajima 1998: 52-56.)

The upper terraces remain one of the most enigmatic sections of Borobudur, and have therefore attracted numerous scholars to suggest new explanations for their design. Another recent theory regarding the upper terraces (Lundquist 1995) emphasizes the view that Borobudur is a pyramidal base representing Mt. Meru, with a round 3-tiered stupa-like palace at its summit, resting in the clouds. Its design could be based on a Mt. Meru temple banner.

Lundquist notes that the number 72, corresponding to the stupas on the upper terraces, is twice the number of deities in the Vajradhatu mandala (36), and is also related to a Tantra verse preserved in a Tibetan version of the *Tripitaka*: "Like the wheel of the law, it has 16 spokes along with a nave. It is possessed of a triple series, and the spokes are to be doubled."

In addition to the number of perforated stupas, Lundquist argues, the perforations themselves may be an attempt to recreate in physical terms a ritual found in Tantra for generating a mental image of a mandala palace above Mt. Meru: "imagine a canopy [appearing] in an instant. On top of that he generates the complete characteristics of an eaved palace and generates within it various seats; and he may also generate within the palace stupas of the varieties 'victorious' and 'radiant'." The well-known Italian buddhist scholar Tucci has compared the stupas to an auspicious square stupa with 108 doors, which was mentioned in the First Sermon. A temple known as Kumbum, in Gyantse, Tibet, is

suggested as another attempt to render this concept in visible terms. However, it does not resemble Borobudur; instead, this stupa has many miniature doors.

Mandalas and Mountains

Mountain symbolism permeates Greater Vehicle Buddhism. Many important sermons introducing new sutras were preached on mountain tops. Greater Vehicle Buddhism evolved a complex image of the universe, consisting of three worlds with a great mountain at the center called Sumeru.

A mandala is a recreation of the home of the gods on Sumeru, a place into which the gods can be invited to descend. An inscription from the Ratu Boko plateau, south of Prambanan, dated 792, is written in the form of a prayer to the "Sumeru of the Perfect Buddhas".

Mountains have long been recognized by social scientists as an important focus of spiritual belief in Javanese culture. Borobudur's location on a hill in the midst of a plain cannot have been chosen by coincidence. Although it is not a high mountain, it is clearly symbolic of a supreme summit of wisdom. The pathway to the top of Borobudur is obviously analogous to the ascent of a pilgrim in search of supreme enlightenment leading to the status of a Bodhisattva.

The *Lalitavistara*, one of the important texts for the builders of Borobudur, mentions 56 Buddhas, and 7 Manushi (human) Buddhas, including Sakyamuni of the present kalpa. In Nepal, Tibet, China, and Japan, the concept of 5 mortal (Manushi) Buddhas is still popular. When Kasyapa, the third Manushi Buddha, died, he was buried in Mount Kukkutapada. When Maitreya descends to earth as the 5th Manushi Buddha, he will first go

to this mountain which will open, and Kasyapa will emerge and give Maitreya the garments of a Buddha (Gupta 1972: 110-110).

Another text which was influential in Java in Borobudur's time is the *Sarvatathagatatattvasamgraha*, or *Tattvasamgraha* for short, which was translated into Chinese by Amoghavajra in 753. The Introduction (*nidana*) to *Tattvasamgraha* honors "The Adorable Great Shining One (Bhagavan Mahavairocana)" who is equated with Siva, Visnu, Indra, and Brahma. The text mentions a Bodhisattva, Sarvarthasiddhi, who was visited by other Buddhas while he was practicing yoga. They taught him how to attain Buddhahood through five-fold meditation, whereupon he was initiated by all the Buddhas with the vajra name Vajradhatu. Then the Buddhas went to Vajramaniratna Sikharakutagara on top of Mt Meru, where they blessed Vajradhatu as Sarvatathagata who then sat on a singhasana to face the four directions. Then Aksobya, Ratnasambhawa, Lokeshvara, and Amoghasiddhi took their seats surrounding Vajradhatu.

The fact that the *vitarka* rather than *dharmacakra* mudra is used in the Borobudur relief depicting the first sermon has long been wondered at. This could be accounted for if the planner of Borobudur understood that in the *Tattvasamgraha* Sakyamuni attained buddhahood after he was instructed by all the Buddhas, and Vairocana was also Sakyamuni. The planner may have thought that the mudra of Vairocana should be the same as that of Sakyamuni in the *Lalitavistara*, *vitarka* mudra.

No text of the *Tattvasamgraha* has been found in Indonesia, but the deities in the *Sang*

Hyang Kamahayanikan (SHK) are closely related to the pantheon of *Tattvasamgraha*. Two mandalas which may have been influential in Java in the ninth century are the Garbadhatu mandala of the *Mahavairocana sutra*, and the Vajradhatu mandala of *Tattvasamgraha*. In Japan, the Garbadhatu mandala represents reality, Vajradhatu mandala represents wisdom. In Java, the two mandalas may have been integrated. In SHK is an explanation of 10 Paramitas, followed by references to Mahaguhya (great secret: yoga, meditation, 10 paramitas) and paramaguhya (highest secret: breath control). Practicing the 10 paramitas leads to accumulation of merit and wisdom; Borobudur's reliefs seem intended to teach them. Thus Borobudur may not be a vajradhatu mandala, but a symbol of tattvasamgraha, represent the place where the five tathagatas assembled on Mt Meru.

A recent doctoral dissertation (Kandahjaya 2004) contains a discussion of the Japanese Buddhist monk Kūkai's

Biographical History of the Tradition of Esoteric Buddhism. Kūkai mentions a Javanese Vajrayana master Bianhong, his fellow disciple when he studied with the Chinese master Huiguo. Bianhong was already educated in Esoteric Buddhism in Java, but wanted to learn more. He was going to southern India but heard that the famous monk and translator Amoghavajra had brought esoteric teachings to China. Bianhong arrived in China in 780 and later Huiguo initiated him into Garbhadhātu tradition. The story of Bianhong svanese knew of the caryâ and yoga tantras by the Bhows that the Jaorobudur period.

In addition to the Chinese sources which can be used to reconstruct ancient Javanese

Buddhism, another important analogy can be drawn from Tibet. The famous Buddhist teacher Atisha (986-1054), was born in India, but spent many years in Indonesia (probably Sumatra). He was born Candragharba, renamed Dipangkara Srijnana when he entered the monkhood, and after initiation into an esoteric Buddhist order he received the title Atisha.

At this time Sumatra was known far and wide as a great centre of Buddhism. The "Golden Island", almost certainly denoting Sumatra is mentioned in Tibetan sources of this period such as the *Hevajra Tantra* and the *Yogaratanmala* (Schoterman 1986: 13). Atisha, at the age of 29, went to study in Srivijaya. He returned to Bengal in 1025 and became head of a monastery there. In 1040 he accepted an invitation to move to Tibet, and he died in a monastery at Netang, 16 kilometers from Lhasa (Schoterman 1985: 14-15; Decker 1995). Another of Atisa's gurus, Pindo, was from Yavadvipa in the South Seas (Newman 1987, pp. 94 ff.).

It is accepted that Buddhist shrines in Tibet were often designed as mandalas. Directions for laying out temples and mandalas use similar or identical Tibetan terms. Tibet's first monastery, Samye, was built as a mandala in the late eighth century. It has a large square central temple, originally three stories tall (now it has five). Outside an enclosing wall are four subsidiary temples, one at each quarter, and eight smaller ones. At each corner is a stupa. The entire complex, surrounded by a circular wall, explicitly symbolizes Mt Meru.

At Tabo and Toling are late 10th or early 11th century mandala temples. Tabo is a one-story Vajradhatumandala with a main image of Vairocana, and subsidiary

divinities of stucco on the walls around it. The inner chamber contains Amitabha, representing ultimate reality "behind" the mandala. Toling is a multi-storied Vajradhatumandala. On the ground floor is an image of Sakyamuni, with a similar image directly overhead. On next two floors are images of Vairocana, while on the top floor is Samvara, a Tantric representation of ultimate reality.

Elsewhere in the Himalayas, at Tango (Bhutan), three stories are assigned to three Buddha-bodies, with Dharmakaya at the top. In plan, the temple is a square with a projection on each side- the plan of the central "palace" of the mandala. In medieval and modern times however the strictly mandala-like systems of temple space arrangement "fell away" in Tibet (Denwood 1972: 49-51).

Brown (1997) has argued that the reliefs on Borobudur were not carved in order to be used to teach devotees about Buddhism. Instead, he argues that they were to be used as icons. He compares them to Indian sites such as Bharhut and Ajanta, where their "tortuous", "strange" arrangement points to a symbolic rather than narrative function. Brown, drawing on work by Rawlinson on texts and Schopen on statues in medieval rock-cut monasteries, argues that the reliefs were carved in order to symbolize his continued teaching after his entry into Nirvana. This ideology, he asserts, was particularly important in Mahayana schools, which would have avoided the criticism that by entering the bliss of non-being rather than remaining in the world as a Bodhisattva, he was exhibiting a form of selfishness.

The Jataka tales were rarely depicted in India after the end of the Gupta period. Some Theravada

pilgrims were probably responsible for a few examples found at Bodh Gaya and Sarnath (Bautze-Picron 1998). Thus narratives were transformed into icons, as Brown argues. At Borobudur, however, it is difficult to accept this argument. Most of the Jatakas at Borobudur are shown in multiple scenes, and thus were perceived as stories, not icons. In this case as in others, one can see that the Javanese were working from different bases than were *stbapakas* in other parts of Asia, and did not need to rely on imported models for their ideas or inspiration. This may have been true at Bagan also. On the roof terrace of the Ananda temple in Bagan, each of the Last Ten Great Jataka is illustrated with about 40 plaques per story! The Ananda temple thus resembles Borobudur in this respect.

Whereas the statues atop the galleries of Borobudur depict the five Jina Buddhas, the reliefs interpose a different set of deities with whom humans can communicate directly. As with the controversy regarding Borobudur's relationship with mandalas, so too we can use Tibetan sources as analogies to widen our basis for comparative analysis. In Tibet, the deities Vajrapani, Avalokitesvara, and Manjusri are often grouped together in the Geluk order. These represent the power, compassion, and wisdom of all Buddhas of past, present, and future. The Geluk order was founded by Tsong Khapa (1357-1419), thus several centuries after Borobudur was built, but there are nevertheless important parallels and probable historical connections between central Java and Tibet, separated though they are by thousands of kilometers of mountains and seas.

Tsong Khapa thought of himself as continuing Atisha's work.

In 1415 he built several three-dimensional mandala monasteries. One of the main texts of Tibetan Buddhism since Atisha's time has been the *Laughing Vajra (Hevajra) Tantra*. It was believed the Manjusri and other Bodhisattvas would regularly be incarnated in the Khom family, head of an important Tibetan monastery (Rhie and Thurmann 1996).

As these references show, Manjusri was an important deity in Tibet as well as in Java. On Borobudur he plays a vital role in directing the young Sudhana at the beginning of his quest for enlightenment. This role fits Manjusri's mission in Buddhism: to lead people in their inquiry into the self, to discover the true nature of reality. This is the importance of the book which lies on the lotus, the stem of which he holds in his left hand: the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*. Buddhism is first mentioned in official Tibetan documents during the reign of King Khri-srong, 740-ca 798. In later sources he was called an emanation of Manjusri. In the 1390s, Tsong Kapa was believed to meet Manjusri every day. It is not too much to imagine that the unusual depiction of Manjusri in the *Gandavyuha* relief on Borobudur as an old rather than a young man is part of an attempt to depict the ruler who originally ordered the construction of Borobudur.

Conclusion.

These brief explorations of recent studies on Buddhism demonstrate the gradual progress that scholars are making in their efforts to explore the many currents which permeated the Buddhist world as it grew to include a large proportion of Asia. The eighth century is considered by many to be the apogee of Buddhist intellectual development. It is unlikely that the

Javanese would have been content to build such an enormous structure as Borobudur in order to represent a simple concept. More likely is that they were creating a network of symbols, spanning a broad range of intellectual concerns, from the simple expression of power formed by a huge stone structure standing out against the horizon, to the subtle interplay of ideas between reliefs, free-standing sculpture, and architectonic motifs such as stupas, each of which could have been considered a building in itself. It is not probable that Borobudur was *only* a mandala, but it is equally improbable that mandala concepts played no role in Borobudur's design. The Javanese architects were not so unsophisticated as to wish to create a monument with only one meaning. Borobudur is a story, not an icon. ☒

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